

Farming odors divide Lake Mills

By Steve Sharp | Posted: Monday, July 2, 2012 11:40 am

LAKE MILLS — Some residents of the Lake Mills area have become infuriated by what they claim are noxious odors being emitted by local chicken egg-production firm Daybreak Foods. They say the smell is already ruining the summer of 2012 on Rock Lake.

Daybreak Foods' Creekwood facility, a large local employer, says it is doing its best to alleviate the egg production wastewater smell through the implementation of the latest in technology. Meanwhile, town of Lake Mills officials and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) seem caught in the middle.

Loren Asche, vice president of Daybreak Foods production, explained to the Daily Times some of the history surrounding his firm's problems with its wastewater treatment and the terrible smells it has entailed when not successful. He also stressed the effort the business is making to clean up the air and be a good neighbor.

According to information provided by Asche, Daybreak Foods purchased its Creekwood facility near the intersection of County Highway A and Crossman Road in 2008 and in doing so, conducted wastewater treatment system upgrades. Daybreak's initial attempt at improvements, however, was a failure. As of today, Daybreak's Creekwood facility was housing approximately 900,000 chickens, according to the company.

"We put in an anaerobic digester to condition wastewater for land application," Asche said. "We got our permits for this digester and brought the digester up to what we thought was working order, but it never panned out. It did not operate as it was sold to us, so we had incomplete digestion of the waste water, hence we had the smell."

The smell has been described by town of Lake Mills resident Bob Jeffers as being "atrocious." Jeffers blamed the Daybreak facility for the smells but said other suspects in the area could be a chicken manure-drying/processor operating under the title Unlimited Renewables, as well as a nearby dog food manufacturer.

Jeffers said he realizes the area has always been dominated by the business of agriculture and expects occasional farm odors, but smells emitted in recent months have been overpowering.

"It is getting to the point where it is seriously affecting the quality of life in Lake Mills," Jeffers said. "My family and friends have had many pontoon boat rides ruined by the sickening odors. We have had picnics and celebrations ruined and have not been able to enjoy our screen porch on many beautiful mornings, afternoons and evenings."

Asche admitted it hasn't been a simple fix to achieve proper wastewater digestion and conditioning. Therefore, there have been odors coming from the Daybreak operation.

"We worked for more than one year with an engineering firm to get it to work," he said of the initial, anaerobic digester. "But we concluded last winter that it wasn't going to work and that we were sold a bad bill of goods. We sympathize with our neighbors."

Another firm told Daybreak the answer to its problems was in aeration rather than the anaerobic digestion previously attempted without success. Daybreak is now utilizing the injection of dissolved oxygen into the water to help alleviate ammonia and Asche said he believes the digestion situation is improving.

"We went with the aeration plan and installed aeration devices in March to alleviate the odors and it began to work," Asche said. "This was all installed in the last week of March, so it was digesting all this material, but some volatilized and that's what gave the smell. Now we are trying to solve the problem and trying to make it better every week, but it takes awhile to turn one of these plants around. We doubled our aeration to accelerate the process and in doing that, it seems to have improved the odors since mid-June. I'm not sure what the neighbors think, but we think it has."

Asche said Daybreak has invested a lot of money and intellectual capital into its latest aeration plan.

"And we are sorry we have offended our neighbors. It is our intention to be good neighbors and maintain compliance with DNR permits and all permits. We live here, too. I live in Shorewood Hills, myself," he said. "Those people in the neighborhood who don't realize it, we have been working with all the engineers and trying to do the right thing here. We just bought a bad product to start with."

Lake Mills town Chairwoman Hope Oostdik said she feels the township is the "lightning rod" in the whole matter, but town leaders have an obligation to protect the health and well-being of their fellow citizens, and mediate when nuisances such as noxious odors arise.

She said, however, it is really up to the DNR to engage in enforcement of its own rules regarding the permitting and operation of Daybreak. She acknowledged that Daybreak is flanked by the dog food manufacturer, as well as the chicken manure drying operation operated by Unlimited Renewables and she said those could also be the source of odors.

Oostdik explained that there seems to be a collision of rural and urban sensibilities in relation to the Daybreak concerns, in which vacationers from outside the area visit and are easily offended by agricultural odors in the vicinity.

"For years since the (Creekwood) plant was there, there was the odor of chicken manure and other agricultural smells. These are basically not covered by our town nuisance ordinance. We have lot of nice summer residents and residences in the area, and those odors travel out over the lake and into the neighborhoods. This causes people to complain," Oostdik said, stressing the township is not the permit source for Daybreak.

"The DNR is the source for permits. Last fall I received some complaints and I referred them to the DNR," she said. "We seem to be the lightning rod for complaints because we are accessible people. I have had to educate myself and the town board about what is going on. We are still receiving complaints. Suggestions were made that we document the complaints as evidence."

Oostdik said the Lake Mills Town Board went to Creekwood for a tour June 21.

"We were greeted by Daybreak executives and we were given a description of their process, and we toured the lagoon and the digester. They are under heavy pressure from the DNR to perform better and they promised to keep us up to date on their solution," Oostdik said. "They have a public relations problem. With the early spring we had early odors and a rough start in June with the hot weekend and that generated most of the complaints. Daybreak's people profess they don't like it and they are working on it ... They clean eggs and they break eggs and they have to be cleaned up. Then you have the dog food smell, too, but how do you scientifically measure odor?"

Oostdik described the smell coming from Daybreak's Creekwood plant on a recent Saturday evening as "atrocious" inside her house.

"A lot of people here in early June — around June 8, 9 and 10 — on Elm Point had a lot of concerns," she said. "I have a log on my desk and when I smell smells I write it down. This is not science. I don't know what the odor is, or the combinations ... The DNR permits this and they will tell you that Creekwood has two months as of the end of May to get things under control."

Oostdik said she wants Daybreak Foods to start demonstrating their plans more obviously.

"They want to get more aerobic activity going on, but that is big-time science," she said. "When they come up for a re-permitting process again this fall there is going to be hell to pay ... It's kind of a rural versus urban thing and we as a township have been targeted on this. There is a lot more to this than meets the eye and it's sort of a DNR thing and we all know where the DNR is at these days. I see Daybreak making an effort. They switched engineers, but who knows what is going to happen? We need to be aware of the public comments and complaints, but we are not the permitting body. We are just a town board with an urban population. And I'm not going to go toe-to-toe with Daybreak Foods."

Kristin Hart is an air permit writer for the DNR's south central region and has direct dealings with Daybreak. She described the matter as "a very complicated situation."

"There is an egg-wash operation at Daybreak, a manure drying operation at Unlimited Renewables and a dog food manufacturer operating all on pretty much the same site," Hart said. "Some people who are complaining say there is a sewer smell, which could be the egg-wash wastewater pond. Then there is a manure smell. Then, sometimes there is what some people have described as a 'dead animal smell' and that could be chicken mortality, or is it the dog food plant? This is not very straightforward."

She said Daybreak has a confined animal feeding operation permit and an air registration permit. Unlimited Renewables has a registration permit. The dog food manufacturer doesn't have an air permit, but Hart said it must still follow state regulations and if it is causing an odor she needs to deal with it.

"I'd like to try to narrow all this down and deal with the chicken farm and manure dryers and if that doesn't pan out, I'd investigate more on the dog food side of things," she said.

Hart acknowledged she has received numerous complaints of odors in the Lake Mills area.

"Yes, I've received lots of them," she said. "They've trickled in since I got involved in 2008. I'd get one or two in the first warm days of spring. We had that warm spell in March of this year and I got lots, and now when it warmed up recently, they went back up. Now I get one or two per week, which is pretty high."

Hart said many of the complaints come from the same people.

"But they don't all live that close to the plant. There is a variety of locations around the area where complaints are generated, so it's hard to tell if it's worse than it used to be or if these people just found out they could call me," Hart said. "It's hard to tell if the smell has gotten worse or not. There is nothing formal from the township or the city. The county has some jurisdiction over this type of thing and we often refer people to the local health department."

Hart said, at this point, she hopes people can be patient and that she believes Daybreak and Unlimited Renewables are working to solve their problems.

"I am monitoring things," she said. "I believe the complaints, but when I go out there it's usually a good day. I don't smell the objectionable odors and who knows why? We have asked both companies for odor control plans and they are both implementing them, with Daybreak working on the egg-wash wastewater treatment plant to achieve a better functioning and Unlimited Renewables testing their exhaust."

Hart said the latter firm has a consultant helping its workers decide whether or not to use a bio-filtration system or an afterburner.

"From my view, we told (these companies) they had a problem and they responded," Hart said.

"We feel pretty good, but the citizens are frustrated and they don't see the progress. I try to help people be patient about this, but I don't live there. I have been pretty happy with the response so far from the two firms. What they are doing will take all summer."

"I'm optimistic we can conquer this problem," Asche said. "We have a similar plant in Ohio and on that farm we retained an engineering firm and we went with aeration there. I have been out there all season and you can't smell wastewater, so I know the aeration works. The digester holds 50 days of water. It just isn't working fast enough to make me or other people happy. We are committed to being good neighbors and being in compliance with all permits. We'll get there. This is a frustrating situation for all involved."